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INTRODUCTION: ALCHEMY AND RELIGION

From the very oldest surviving sources onwards, we seem to encounter pronounced religious elements in alchemical literature. From the beginning, as American historian Pamela H. Smith recently put it, the literature of alchemy ‘included a remarkable accretion of religious and gnostic concerns with the relationship of matter and spirit’.¹ An incomplete treatise attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus (ca. 460–370 BCE) bears the evocative title *Physika kai mystika* (ca. 100 CE), seemingly alluding to mysticism but rendered as ‘Natural and Secret Questions’ in a recent edition.² In Hellenized Egypt, the alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (fl. 300 CE) was familiar with Gnostic teachings that emphasized man’s need for salvific knowledge to escape the prison of the mortal body and return to the divine. He interspersed his alchemical treatises with various dreams or visions and, based on the apocryphal Book of Enoch, held that fallen angels had taught mankind the art of alchemy.³ In the fourteenth century, the Italian author Petrus Bonus (fl. 1330) wrote a treatise on alchemy entitled *Pretiosa margarita novella* (1st ed. 1546), which contains a chapter arguing ‘that this art is both natural *and* divine’.⁴ The earliest known German work of alchemy, the *Liber Trinitatis* (ca. 1410/15–19) or ‘Book of the Holy Trinity’, details extended analogies between Jesus Christ and the philosophers’ stone.⁵ Though the text of the work remains largely inaccessible, its cycle of images became part and parcel of later alchemical literature, with the *Rosarium philosophorum* (1st ed. 1550) as an early and widely disseminated example. The alchemical process described in the *Rosarium* culminates with the philosophers’ stone – the fabled transmuting agent that could turn base metals into gold – visually portrayed as the risen Christ.⁶ These are just a few examples among many that gave rise to an important interpretive approach to alchemy that views it as primarily religious, spiritual, moral or psychological.

¹ Smith, ‘Preface’, p. xiii.

² Martelli, *The Four Books of Pseudo-Democritus*, pp. 78/79. ‘[Φ]υσικά καὶ μυστικά’. On the title and its associations, see also Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 12.

³ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 15–24. See also Fraser, ‘Zosimos of Panopolis’; Mertens, *Les alchimistes grecs IV/1*.

⁴ Bonus, *Margarita Preciosa Novella* (1602), ch. 6, on p. 141. ‘In quo ostendit, quòd hæc ars sit naturalis, et sit divina’. See also Crisciani, ‘The Conception of Alchemy’.

⁵ See Telle’s entry in Ruh, et al., *Verfasserlexikon*, s.v. ‘Ulmannus’. For a study of the work’s imagery, see Obrist, *Les débuts de l’imagerie alchimique*, ch. III. There is no scholarly edition, merely a flawed transcription of a single manuscript: Junker, *Das ‘Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit’*.

⁶ Anonymous, *Rosarium philosophorum*, f. a4r. On the German *alchemia picta* that led to the *Rosarium*, see Telle, *Sol und Luna*.

THE JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVE

After alchemy had for a long time been disregarded as a pseudoscience or, worse, sheer ‘rubbish’, the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and the Romanian-born historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–86) did much to stimulate interest in the subject.⁷ Though strictly speaking distinct, their approaches quickly became merged in the context of the annual *Eranos* conferences and associated publications.⁸ According to Jung’s understanding, alchemy was not only the precursor of chemistry but also of psychology. He described an ideal or classical alchemy, ‘in which the spirit of the alchemist really still wrestled with the problems of matter, in which the inquisitive consciousness faced the dark space of the unknown and believed to recognize shapes and laws therein, though these did not originate in the matter but in the soul’.⁹ In contrast to simplified accounts, Jung clearly held that actual laboratory work provided the foundation for this to take place – he lamented its neglect in the wake of Jacob Boehme (1574/75–1624), who plays a crucial role in this study.¹⁰ Elsewhere, he even described the alchemical process as ‘an essentially chemical investigation’.¹¹ As a psychologist, however, Jung was chiefly interested in alchemical imagery, which he understood as the projections of the unconscious: somewhat provocatively, his 1946 contribution to *Ambix*, the leading journal for the history of alchemy and chemistry, described alchemy as ‘a real museum of projections’, and claimed that, ‘indeed, its history should never have been treated by chemists, for it offers an ideal hunting-ground for the psychologists’.¹² According to Jung, the approach to alchemy taken by chemists obscured much of its richness, which he as a psychologist was better able to appreciate and communicate.

⁷ The quote is from Pagel, ‘The Vindication of “Rubbish”’, p. 10. See also Neugebauer, ‘The Study of Wretched Subjects’.

⁸ For more on this subject, see Hakl, *Eranos*; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 277–314.

⁹ Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, p. 266. ‘[W]o der Geist des Alchemisten noch wirklich mit den Problemen des Stoffes rang, wo das forschende Bewußtsein dem dunkeln Raume des Unbekannten gegenüberstand und darin Gestalten und Gesetze zu erblicken glaubte, welche aber nicht dem Stoff, sondern der Seele entstammten.’

¹⁰ Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, pp. 265–67.

¹¹ Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, p. 542. ‘[E]ine an sich chemische Untersuchung’. This aspect is also highlighted by Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, pp. 11–15; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 289–91.

¹² Jung, ‘The Bologna Enigma’, p. 185.

Jung's psychological interpretation of alchemy provided the dominant paradigm for research on the subject from the 1940s to the 1990s.¹³ Jung's was an attempt to understand the neigh-impenetrable language and especially the fascinating symbolism of alchemical literature that was fresh and meaningful at the time of its first publication. Even pioneering historians of science such as Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs (1930–94), whose work on the alchemy of Isaac Newton (1643–1727) continues to command respect, viewed the subject through Jungian lenses.¹⁴ To this day, Jung's views on alchemy continue to inform popular portrayals and perceptions of alchemy, and they still contribute to stimulating interest in the subject. While mild criticism of Jung's ahistorical approach accompanied his reception in the historiography of alchemy from the start, only in 1982 did Swiss art historian Barbara Obrist call for its abolition and present a convincing critique.¹⁵ According to her trenchant analysis, the very popularity of Jung's work had led to 'general confusion' by an inflationary use of the term 'alchemy' that saw it applied to all sorts of evocative art, including mythological depictions and the work of the famous Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516).¹⁶ If all intriguing imagery could be studied as alchemy, the term risked losing any analytical value it possessed.

THE NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ALCHEMY AND ITS LIMITS

Two American chemists and historians of science, William R. Newman (b. 1955) and Lawrence M. Principe (b. 1962), have since expanded on Obrist's criticism of Jung. Through a series of papers and studies, they successfully replaced Jung's approach by a new paradigm, known as the New Historiography of Alchemy, and firmly integrated alchemy into the history of science.¹⁷ In particular, Newman and Principe reproduce alchemical processes experimentally by decoding arcane language and imagery,

¹³ This is emphasized by Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, pp. 2–9; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 288–95.

¹⁴ Principe, 'Reflections on Newton's Alchemy', pp. 213–16.

¹⁵ Obrist, *Les débuts de l'imagerie alchimique*, pp. 11–36. On the significance of Obrist's critique, see Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, p. 8; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 293, n. 124. For an exemplary early review of Jung's work on alchemy, balancing lavish praise with mild criticism, see e.g. Pagel, 'Jung's Views on Alchemy'.

¹⁶ Obrist, *Les débuts de l'imagerie alchimique*, pp. 35–36, on p. 35. '[C]onfusion générale'.

¹⁷ For the most important papers in this regard, see Newman, 'Eirenaeus Philalethes and Carl Jung'; Newman & Principe, 'Alchemy vs. Chemistry'; Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy'. For recent overviews of the state of research, see e.g.

thus powerfully demonstrating an alternative interpretation for what Jung viewed as ‘psychic processes expressed in pseudochemical language’.¹⁸ In a classic paper ‘Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historical Mistake’ (1998), Newman and Principe challenge the notion that alchemy and chemistry are intrinsically different. In a widespread dichotomy, chemistry traditionally represents ‘the modern, scientific, and rational’, while alchemy, on the other hand, is alternatively viewed negatively as ‘the archaic, irrational, and even consciously fraudulent’ or idealized and romanticized as having a defining ‘spiritual or psychic dimension’.¹⁹ This reflected the double challenge Newman and Principe originally faced. Dutch historian of esotericism Wouter J. Hanegraaff explains that ‘they emphasize the scientific legitimacy of alchemy against popular Jungian interpretations (which see it as essentially spiritual) *and* against the old historiography (which sees it as an “occult” pseudoscience)’.²⁰ Among professional historians working in an Anglophone context, the ‘old historiography’ is now definitely a thing of the past. Scholarly debates in certain other linguistic contexts have been left behind by the rapid development brought about through the New Historiography.²¹

Newman and Principe argue that there is no inherent distinction between alchemy and chemistry, which previous generations of scholars had taken for granted. More specifically, early-modern actors routinely used the term ‘alchemy’ to refer to what we would recognize as chemistry and ‘chemistry’ for what we deem quintessentially alchemical, such as the transmutation of metals: there is a mismatch between the emic and etic application of these terms, for which reason scholars should better use the archaic term ‘chymistry’.²² To name but one famous example, the voluminous

Martinón-Torres, ‘Some Recent Developments’; Newman, ‘What Have We Learned from the Recent Historiography of Alchemy?’

¹⁸ Qtd. Newman, ‘Eirenaeus Philalethes and Carl Jung’, p. 160. For an early paper using this approach, see Principe, ‘“Chemical Translation” and the Role of Impurities’. See also Principe, ‘Alchemy Restored’, p. 310; Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁹ Newman & Principe, ‘Alchemy vs. Chemistry’, pp. 34 and 35, resp. For the place of this paper in current historiography, see Martinón-Torres, ‘Some Recent Developments’, pp. 220–22. For an early critical reaction, see e.g. Abbri, ‘Alchemy and Chemistry’.

²⁰ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 196. The emphasis is Hanegraaff’s.

²¹ In German scholarship, the New Historiography can still be side-stepped; see e.g. two contributions to a recent collective volume and exhibition catalogue: Trepp, ‘Alchemie und Religion’; Schott, ‘Heil und Heilung’. Trepp summarizes findings first presented in a 2009 monograph; see Trepp, *Von der Glückseligkeit alles zu wissen*. Schott’s paper is incoherent and reiterates Jungian positions without due consideration of the New Historiography.

²² Newman & Principe, ‘Alchemy vs. Chemistry’, p. 64. I should note that there are important

Alchemia (1597) of Andreas Libavius (1555–1621) ‘is usually and fairly described as the first textbook of chemistry’ or ‘a landmark in chemical literature’.²³ Establishing this discrepancy is a crucial insight that cannot be passed over, as it points to the great complexity of the historical record. Principe and Newman further explore this issue in a crucial paper titled ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’ (2001), which devotes much attention to tracing the historical origins of ‘a “spiritual” interpretation of alchemy’ (which views ‘alchemical adepts as possessors of vast esoteric knowledge and spiritual enlightenment’) back to ‘nineteenth-century occultism’.²⁴ Projected back unto earlier alchemy, such interpretations amount to anachronistic misrepresentations: Principe and Newman ‘find no indication that the vast majority of alchemists were working on anything other than material substances toward material goals’.²⁵ Instead of portraying alchemists as otherworldly initiates, the New Historiography thus places them in the company of miners, metallurgists, assayers, distillers, pharmacists and even balneologists, all of whom drew on chymical techniques to work with material substances towards all sorts of practical, entrepreneurial and medical purposes.

Taken together, the importance of these papers cannot be emphasized enough, as Principe and Newman made a cogent case for a fresh start that has come to define the field for the past two decades. Whereas it seemed clear to earlier generations of researchers that alchemy was either an outright pseudoscience or primarily spiritual, religious, moral or psychological, the New Historiography has led historians to see alchemy as primarily scientific and experimental. Nevertheless, there are also scholars who criticize the New Historiography from various perspectives. These include

problems with Newman and Principe’s suggestion of using the anachronistic ‘chymistry’, which has also been criticized by Abbri, ‘Alchemy and Chemistry’, esp. p. 214. Their accounts feature a pronounced teleological subtext, in which alchemy becomes chemistry by way of chymistry. Additionally, they do not distinguish sufficiently between the emic and etic levels of their argument: they convincingly show that emic usage does not confirm etic preconceptions as to the meaning of the terms ‘alchemy’ and ‘chemistry’, but they sidestep the challenge to gain a more accurate understanding of how individual writers employed and expanded the terminology at their disposal. For an important discussion on the topic of emic and etic terms in the history of science, see Jardine, ‘Etics and Emics’.

²³ E.g. Rocke, ‘Agricola, Paracelsus, and “Chymia”’, p. 38; Hannaway, *The Chemists and the Word*, p. x. See also the discussion in Newman & Principe, ‘Alchemy vs. Chemistry’, pp. 44–47. For a full-length study on Libavius, see Moran, *Andreas Libavius*. In connection with his grandson, Georg Lorenz Seidenbecher, Libavius will be mentioned again in Chapters II.4 and III.1.

²⁴ Principe & Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, p. 388.

²⁵ Principe & Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, p. 397.

the Italian philosopher and historian of science Ferdinando Abbri, the British literary scholar Sir Brian Vickers, the Romanian philosopher Florin-George Călian as well as the English scholar of esotericism Hereward Tilton, the author of a study on the learned alchemist and physician Michael Maier (1569–1622); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, whom we have encountered before, also made an important contribution to the debate by drawing attention to its long history.²⁶ Though they all have diverging aims and tackle the debate from a variety of angles, all of these critics agree that the New Historiography implies an overly restrictive view of its subject and downplays important topics in favour of chemical content and experimental technique, to the extent that alchemy implicitly becomes proto-chemistry.

Challenging Crypto-Essentialist Bias

This study sets out to contribute to the debate on the relation between alchemy and religion. Rather than merely contradicting the New Historiography, I seek to challenge the essentialist preconceptions common to the two dominant positions in this debate. Proponents of Jungian and related views express their definitions much more readily. However, the New Historiography – for all its criticism of Jungian approaches and the old historiography – is not entirely immune to the pitfalls of essentialism. At the same time, the pioneering work of Principe and Newman has shown how alchemy can be studied as a historical phenomenon, rather than a clearly defined, ahistorical category. In fact, by strictly historicizing alchemy, the present study follows the approach of the New Historiography to its logical conclusion. Hanegraaff has perceptively characterized the two main positions. For Jung, Eliade and many in their wake, ‘alchemy may sometimes look like science, but it is really psychology or religion’.²⁷ For Newman, Principe and the New Historiography of Alchemy, ‘alchemy may sometimes look like religion, but it is really science’.²⁸ Proponents of the former

²⁶ Abbri, ‘Alchemy and Chemistry’; Vickers, ‘The “New Historiography” and the Limits of Alchemy’; Călian, ‘*Alkimia Operativa* and *Alkimia Speculativa*’; Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, pp. 1–34 and 253–56; Tilton, ‘Alchymia Archetypica’; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 191–207. For shorter discussions, see e.g. Forshaw, ‘Subliming Spirits’, pp. 261–65; Janacek, *Alchemical Belief*, pp. 12–15; Clericuzio, ‘[Review:] ... *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*’; Roos, ‘The Experimental Approach’. As a representative of the old historiography that views alchemy as inalienably occult, Vickers has been refuted twice; see Newman, ‘Brian Vickers on Alchemy’; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 184–91.

²⁷ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 197.

²⁸ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 196.

view are quite forthcoming in this respect: Eliade's entry on alchemy in his *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987) frankly states that 'the alchemist's quest was not scientific but spiritual'.²⁹ In contrast, Principe and Newman explicitly attack 'an essentialist picture of alchemy' and distance themselves from earlier 'Positivist and Presentist Treatments'.³⁰ However, several of their critics have challenged their 'proto-chemical thesis', along with its implied 'reductionism', or 'their picture of alchemy as proto-chemistry'.³¹ Hanegraaff diagnoses their approach as 'crypto-essentialist', observing that 'it appears extremely difficult to avoid the subtle but crucial shift of meaning that is implicit in statements suggesting that alchemy is therefore "really" science (and not religion)'.³² Principe and Newman do not want to write essentialist accounts of alchemy but they unwittingly cannot escape doing just that. Indeed, once aware of Hanegraaff's assessment, it becomes possible to see the implicit view of alchemy as 'really science' throughout many studies written through the lenses of the New Historiography.³³

Hanegraaff's initial point of departure is the lingering notion that 'the history of alchemy' ended 'in the eighteenth century'.³⁴ Particularly he and Tilton have criticized the New Historiography for disregarding the history of alchemy after the seventeenth century, and recent remarks by Smith and Nummedal point in a similar direction by emphasizing continuity.³⁵ Put simply and drastically, the view with which these scholars take issue holds that alchemy ceased to exist when it stopped being scientifically relevant; all that was useful about it was transmuted into chemistry sometime during the 1720s.³⁶ This narrative is based on reified and mutually exclusive concepts

²⁹ Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, s.v. 'Alchemy', on p. 183.

³⁰ Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', pp. 413 and 415, resp. The former statement describes the panpsychic interpretation of alchemy; Principe also uses the similar phrase 'essentialist view of alchemy' elsewhere: Principe, 'Reflections on Newton's Alchemy', p. 218.

³¹ Călian, 'Alkimia Operativa and Alkimia Speculativa', p. 188; Clericuzio, '[Review:] ... *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*', p. 407.

³² Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 197 (n. 166) and 196, resp.

³³ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 196.

³⁴ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 197, n. 166. Principe also alludes to this view when he refers to 'the eighteenth-century "end" of alchemy'; see Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 5.

³⁵ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, p. 256; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, p. 197; Smith, 'Preface', p. xvii; Nummedal, 'The Alchemist', pp. 58–59.

³⁶ For insistent criticism of the view that alchemy was transmuted into chemistry, which still undergirded Newman and Principe's 'Alchemy vs. Chemistry' paper, see Abbri, 'Alchemy and

of alchemy and chemistry, although these are explicitly dismissed by the New Historiography. These reifications are, in turn, derived from an older grand narrative of Western modernity, according to which superstition or magic give way to religion, which in turn is superseded by science.³⁷ In the nineteenth century, such views gave rise to the thesis of an inevitable conflict between science and religion.³⁸ Many important debates within the historiography of early-modern science throughout the second half of the twentieth century can be understood as grappling with the inherited, intellectual baggage of the reified categories of science, religion and magic.³⁹

Returning to the subject of alchemy and its supposed demise in the early eighteenth century, it cannot be denied that the 1720s brought about crucial changes. In a number of recent papers, Principe has explored this historical process in fascinating detail.⁴⁰ His research shows how precisely the Enlightenment rejection of alchemy came about, how formerly defining pursuits such as *chrysopoeia* – the attempt to turn lesser metals into gold – were dissociated from chemistry and summarily rejected. Ultimately, Principe's findings suggest that chemistry did not eclipse alchemy but that there was a parting of the ways, which allows for the continued existence of alchemy and chemistry side by side. Additionally, Principe included an account of post-1700 alchemy into his accessible and valuable survey *The Secrets of Alchemy* (2013). He writes that the time 'from the eighteenth century to the present day ... should be treated as a significant part of the full history of alchemy'.⁴¹ However, Principe immediately proceeds to warn readers: 'It is also to this period that we owe most of the misconceptions about pre-eighteenth-century alchemy that remain

Chemistry'. Comp. Nummedal, 'The Alchemist'; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 203–7.

³⁷ An enduringly popular presentation of this narrative is Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1900). Comp. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 165 and 279–81.

³⁸ For more background on the so-called Conflict Thesis, see e.g. Turner, 'The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion'.

³⁹ In the 1960s, Dame Frances A. Yates (1899–1981) triggered a debate that continued for decades when she argued that 'the Hermetic tradition' (antithetical to reason and thus closely related to the reified categories of magic and superstition) had a positive impact on the scientific revolution of the early-modern era. Comp. Yates, *Giordano Bruno*; Yates, 'The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science'. For various critiques of the Yates thesis, dating from the 1970s to the 2000s, see e.g. Westman, 'The Yates Thesis Reconsidered'; Vickers, 'Introduction'; Hanegraaff, 'Beyond the Yates Paradigm'; Copenhaver, 'Magic'.

⁴⁰ Principe, 'A Revolution Nobody Noticed?'; Principe, 'Transmuting Chymistry into Chemistry'; Principe, 'The End of Alchemy?'

⁴¹ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 4–5.

widespread.⁴² Significantly, Principe continues to insist on the primacy of alchemy as practised in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and posits a rift between it and later forms. Introducing the fourth chapter, he writes: ‘I am going to leapfrog over that golden age for the time being to recount transmutational alchemy’s sharp decline in the early eighteenth century and its subsequent revivals’.⁴³ In what follows, I shall particularly engage with Principe’s views: as one of the leading representatives of the New Historiography, he has shown himself exceptionally attentive to non-scientific concerns and written very perceptive accounts of visual and religious elements in alchemy.⁴⁴ Yet even in Principe’s work, which shows the New Historiography at the height of its sophistication, there is an implicit bias and crypto-essentialism deserving of criticism.

In addition to the temporary suspension of chronology, there are three curious but related features of Principe’s chapter on post-1700 alchemy. First, instead of charting how alchemy changed almost beyond recognition, Principe seeks to emphasize continued attempts at laboratory *chrysopoeia*.⁴⁵ Secondly, Principe’s account is highly selective and does not give enough examples of modern and contemporary alchemists. This last aspect would escape most readers, were it not for the research of French scholar Richard Caron.⁴⁶ Thirdly, Principe repeatedly describes modern forms of alchemy, in which psychological, moral and religious considerations figure prominently, not as legitimate, if vastly different, continuations of pre-modern alchemy. In effect, he appears to view modern alchemy as bad historiography that leads to a distorted picture of pre-1700 alchemy, which was really based primarily on laboratory activity.⁴⁷ Rather than presenting a neutral account, Principe describes different modern revivals of alchemy and holds them against the normative benchmark of ‘seventeenth-century (and earlier) alchemy’.⁴⁸ The first revival occurred among secret societies, such as the *Gold- und Rosenkreuz*, in Germany ‘at

⁴² Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 5.

⁴³ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 83.

⁴⁴ As exemplary studies worthy of emulation, I should like to draw attention to his paper on sexuality and gender in alchemical imagery and his account of Zosimos already referenced earlier: Principe, ‘Revealing Analogies’; Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 15–24.

⁴⁵ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 90–94.

⁴⁶ See Caron’s entry in Hanegraaff, et al., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. ‘Alchemy V: 19th–20th Century’; Caron, ‘Notes sur l’histoire de l’alchimie’. For Principe’s limited use of Caron, see Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 231, n. 19.

⁴⁷ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 83–84 and 104–5.

⁴⁸ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 92.

the end of the eighteenth century' and 'lasted only a few years into the nineteenth'.⁴⁹ After this brief interlude, 'once again alchemy was only dormant rather than deceased', though there were some faithful experimenters who held to its ideals.⁵⁰ The 'second revival of alchemy ... was perhaps not so much a rebirth as it was a movement that promoted a radical reinterpretation of alchemy's entire history before the eighteenth century'.⁵¹ Principe is referring to figures such as the erudite Englishwoman Mary Anne Atwood (*née* South; 1817–1910) and the learned American Major-General Ethan Allen Hitchcock (1798–1870), who described alchemy as the art of self-transformation.⁵² Particularly this second revival is not simply treated as a historical event but rather as a rival interpretation of alchemy with which Principe disagrees.⁵³ This is possible because he accords to early-modern alchemy the status of a normative benchmark and posits a rupture between this ideal of alchemy and its modern reinterpretations. Yet despite the elements I have criticized, Principe's chapter on 'Alchemy from the Eighteenth Century to the Present' clearly shows that the history of alchemy does not end around 1700.

By demarcating his own approach to alchemy, which views it as essentially scientific, from others and presenting it as the most reliable, Principe seems to be engaging in the kind of activity historians of science have described as 'boundary-work'.⁵⁴ Due to this, I believe that Principe's approach betrays a residual essentialism that clashes with distinctly modern forms of alchemy. Instead of accepting and studying these as historical phenomena, Principe rejects them in occasionally polemical terms. In effect, this leads to the impression that Principe engages with Mary Anne Atwood and C. G. Jung, among others, not as a historian but as a rival alchemist. In fact, by

⁴⁹ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 90–92, on p. 92. For more on the *Gold- und Rosenkreuz*, see e.g. Geffarth, *Religion und arkane Hierarchie*; McIntosh, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason*.

⁵⁰ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 92–94, on p. 92.

⁵¹ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 94.

⁵² For more on Hitchcock, see Cohen, 'Ethan Allen Hitchcock'. His collection of alchemical literature has been preserved as 'M-108: The Ethan Allen Hitchcock Alchemy Collection' at Missouri, St. Louis Mercantile Library; see https://www.umsl.edu/mercantile/collections/mercantile-library-special-collections/special_collections/slma-108.html. For more on Atwood, see Chapters IV.3–4.

⁵³ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 94–105. This is also the thrust of Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy'.

⁵⁴ See the classic paper by Gieryn, 'Boundary-Work'. See also Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science*. For an exemplary discussion of different schools of alchemical theory, see Newman, 'From Alchemy to "Chymistry"', pp. 513–17.

reproducing alchemical experiments today and encouraging others to do so, Newman and Principe have themselves become part of the continuing history of alchemy. Principe confidently announces his awareness of this when he describes the New Historiography as ‘a *third* alchemical revival currently in progress’, following the earlier two described above.⁵⁵ In many ways, this third revival is the antidote to the second, and in the conclusion, Principe summarizes how exactly:

[A]lchemy ... remains foremost a part of the long history of science, of the endeavor of human beings to know, understand, control, and make use of the world. Its difficult textual legacy as well as long-lived misconceptions or misrepresentations of its aims and practitioners [propagated by the second revival] often obscured this connection, but current scholarship restores the continuities (without ignoring the important distinctions) between alchemy and modern science.⁵⁶

This statement is, in fact, explicitly essentialist. By implication, any form of alchemy that does not correspond to this understanding falls beyond the purview of alchemy proper. Since I consider this an arbitrary limitation of the field, I call for expanding the scope of the historiography of alchemy by rejecting essentialist definitions, however subtle.

Expanding the Scope of the Historiography of Alchemy

From the vantage point of the New Historiography, many instances of modern alchemy simply amount to distortions and misrepresentations: in fact, this basically summarizes the argument of Principe and Newman’s ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’. However, in acting as arbiters of what can rightfully be called alchemy and making such normative value judgments, Principe and Newman no longer speak as historians but as philosophers, cultural critics – or even alchemists themselves, as noted above. The problem with this approach is that the historical record, at one stage or another, will inevitably clash with essentialist definitions. Interestingly, Boaz Huss has analyzed the effects of a similar bias in the historiography of kabbalah, which disregarded contemporary forms for a long time, deeming its practitioners ‘nothing more than inauthentic charlatans’.⁵⁷ Instead of describing historical actors as misrepresenting alchemy, it would be more appropriate to think of their work in terms of productive misunderstanding. In his study on kabbalah as an

⁵⁵ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 105.

⁵⁶ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 209.

⁵⁷ Huss, ‘Ask No Questions’, p. 148. See also Hanegraaff, ‘The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah’, pp. 107–10.

aesthetic paradigm, Swiss literary scholar Andreas B. Kilcher includes a spirited defence of this category.⁵⁸ Going one step further, Hanegraaff rhetorically asks whether it is possible to historically distinguish productive and ‘destructive misunderstanding’ (or misrepresentation), suggesting that any such attempt ‘is normative and implicitly metaphysical’.⁵⁹ Moreover, Kilcher dismisses ‘the degree of identifiability [of aesthetic kabbalah] with historic kabbalah’ as an arbitrary, normative benchmark that is accompanied by terms expressing negative value judgments such as “pseudo-kabbalah”, “inauthentic kabbalah”, “confused kabbalah” etc.⁶⁰ If we substitute ‘spiritual alchemy’ for ‘aesthetic kabbalah’ and ‘early-modern alchemy’ for ‘historic kabbalah’, this equally applies to the debate on alchemy.

I am arguing that the history of alchemy must try to avoid any essentialist preconception or bias, be it ever so subtle, and instead take historical actors at their word when they write or talk about alchemy and related terms. ‘In short, we need to use actors’ categories’, American historian Tara Nummedal writes, ‘rather than imposing our own; if historical authors (or printers) included something in the category of alchemy, then historians, too, need to do the same.’⁶¹ The history of post-1700 alchemy is not merely the history of ‘Redefinitions, Revivals, and Reinterpretations’ of the real thing, falling short of the high-water mark achieved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶² It is the history of how alchemy changed almost beyond recognition, but change is the way of history: Nummedal forcefully makes this point by showing how alchemy moved from the forefront of scientific concerns to becoming emblematic of the rejection of modern science in some corners of contemporary society.⁶³ Similarly, Smith suggests that the (modern) history of alchemy could be tackled ‘as an inverted history of the scientific revolution: not how did the “sciences” come into being, but, rather, how did “pseudosciences” emerge?’⁶⁴ Nummedal only notes this dramatic change and does not explicitly call for its investigation, yet she can be seen to suggest a more neutral approach than Smith: alchemy ‘today is as vibrant as it ever has been’, but it occupies a very different niche than it did during the scientific

⁵⁸ Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala*, pp. 25–27.

⁵⁹ Hanegraaff, ‘The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah’, pp. 108–9. The emphasis is Hanegraaff’s.

⁶⁰ Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala*, p. 27. ‘[D]er Grad der Identifizierbarkeit mit der historischen Kabbala’; ‘“Pseudo-Kabbala”, “unechte Kabbala”, “verwirrte Kabbala” etc.’

⁶¹ Nummedal, ‘The Alchemist’, p. 64.

⁶² This is the main title of chapter 4 in Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 83.

⁶³ Nummedal, ‘The Alchemist’.

⁶⁴ Smith, ‘Preface’, p. xii.

revolution.⁶⁵ Correspondingly, today there are perhaps more people than ever practising or engaging with alchemy (whatever they might mean by this) in various forms, not all of which depend on laboratory practice.⁶⁶ An expanded historiography of alchemy would not restrict itself to a single ‘long “chymical” tradition’ but rather draw attention to the complexity of alchemy as an ever-changing historical phenomenon that defies any single definition.⁶⁷

To appropriately deal with this great variety, historians of alchemy must adopt a much wider view of their field of inquiry and pay particular attention to how this diversification came about in the first place. Nummedal follows Hanegraaff’s lead, which points in the direction of a more strictly historicized and therefore more inclusive understanding of alchemy. It even includes the earlier approaches which Principe and Newman seek to discard:

Of course, if alchemy evolves or mutates through history, this implies that nineteenth-century occultist and ‘spiritual’ understandings of alchemy as well as their further developments in Jungian psychology, and so on, are legitimate objects of study (which is not the same thing as methodological perspectives *for* study) in the history of alchemy.⁶⁸

Significantly, these earlier approaches no longer appear as guiding methodologies; instead, they become part of the continuing history of alchemy and its interpretation. It is crucial to note that this extension does not reject but, on the contrary, depends upon the very principles basic to the New Historiography: by its very success, it enables us to view modern writers on alchemy no longer as rivals but as subjects for historical inquiry. My study exemplifies this approach by placing Mary Anne Atwood in a long line of Boehmists – followers of Jacob Boehme – engaging with alchemy. In addition to the growing rejection of alchemy Principe himself has documented in a number of recent studies, corresponding to Smith’s suggestion, this enables me to show that Atwood and other modern writers could also confidently draw on a rather different face of alchemy than its laboratory pursuits.⁶⁹ In some ways, then, my study shows how a marginal strand of early-modern alchemy came to have a far-reaching impact on modern conceptions of alchemy.

⁶⁵ Nummedal, ‘The Alchemist’, p. 58.

⁶⁶ Nummedal, ‘The Alchemist’, pp. 58–59; Hanegraaff, et al., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. ‘Alchemy V: 19th–20th Century’. For a full-length study on alchemy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see e.g. Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy*.

⁶⁷ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 210.

⁶⁸ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 197–98, n. 166. The emphases are Hanegraaff’s.

⁶⁹ Comp. Principe, ‘A Revolution Nobody Noticed?’; Principe, ‘Transmuting Chymistry into Chemistry’; Principe, ‘The End of Alchemy?’

RELIGION, ALCHEMY AND SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY

After this general critique of the New Historiography, it is necessary to specifically address Principe and Newman's position on the relation between alchemy and religion. If the recent historiography has greatly enhanced our understanding of laboratory alchemy in many ways, including the reproduction of historic experiments, other aspects more traditionally associated with alchemy are only gradually beginning to profit from renewed scrutiny. In part, this happens by questioning what has now become the received wisdom on alchemy and religion, articulated by Principe and Newman on various occasions. In the closing section of his more recent survey, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Principe describes his view as follows:

In terms of alchemy specifically, what I am arguing is that the connections between it and the divine are indeed very close, but that relationship was not wholly unique in the early modern period. A similar close relationship can be found in other studies of the natural world from that time (as in Kepler and Kircher). These relationships are manifestations not only of the piety but more intrinsically of the unified cosmic vision of so many thinkers of the period. The significant links between alchemy and religion might sometimes seem to mark it out as something alien from 'science,' but only if the comparison is made with reference to the science of our own day.⁷⁰

Here as elsewhere, by the way, Principe seems chiefly concerned with countering the accusation of presentism and does not consider the essentialist understanding of alchemy as science to be problematic.⁷¹ The New Historiography claims that early-modern alchemy is neither more nor less religious than any other branch of contemporaneous natural philosophy, broadly construed. If we can no longer view the art of transmutation as intrinsically religious, this forces us to support any claims regarding alchemy and religion with material drawn directly from the historical record.

In her introduction to a number of papers on the topic, Nummedal has made a very similar point. She summarizes the issue as follows: 'Principe and Newman cleared the way for more rigorous, historical scholarship' when it comes to the topic of alchemy and religion, and 'only through such careful, focused work' is it possible to avoid 'vague and anachronistic generalizations about alchemy being somehow intrinsically or uniquely "religious," "spiritual," or "mystical," and ... understand, instead, precisely how and why alchemists, exegetes, and theologians worked so hard

⁷⁰ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 205. A very similar passage already occurs in Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', p. 400.

⁷¹ Comp. Principe, 'Alchemy Restored', p. 311.

to forge connections between their alchemical and religious endeavours'.⁷² This is what this study sets out to do. Rather than mere epiphenomena of a supposed history of alchemy proper, the pronounced religious elements (which Principe and Newman tend to relegate to inferior status as 'extended religious conceits') noted at the outset – and their long-term consequences – thus become worthy of study in their own right, as part of an encompassing history of alchemy.⁷³ This represents a middle path between viewing religious elements as secondary, '(often extensive) expressions of period piety', as the New Historiography does, and defining the essence of alchemy as religious, as in the older approaches Principe and Newman criticize.⁷⁴ In a very real sense, then, this study could not have been written without the paradigm shift introduced by the New Historiography: previously, the dominance of psychological, religious or spiritual interpretations of alchemy meant that any document containing evidence supporting such interpretations merely confirmed what was already known.

Scholars have used a variety of terms to draw attention to the pronounced religious elements of alchemical literature. Unfortunately, the usefulness of these terms is frequently exhausted in doing just that. Joachim Telle (1939–2013) – a German literary scholar and, during his lifetime, the outstanding expert on the manuscript record of alchemy – frequently employed the deliberately vague term 'theo-alchemy' (*Theoalchemie*) to describe the mingling of alchemy with theology that could take place in any number of ways.⁷⁵ Apart from its evocative, signalling power, this term is of very limited analytical value. More problematic still are terms that suggest easy binaries. Italian scholar Italo Ronca (1936–2013), for instance, distinguishes between 'exoteric alchemy' and 'esoteric alchemy', the former practised by artisans, the latter 'an ambiguous system of thought', the aim of which 'was to attain a superior spiritual

⁷² Nummedal, 'Alchemy and Religion', pp. 312 and 322, resp.

⁷³ For the quote, see Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', p. 388. For a study on alchemy in French devotional literature, see Matton, 'Thématique alchimique et littérature religieuse'.

⁷⁴ For the quote, see Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', p. 397.

⁷⁵ Examples can be found from the early 1980s onwards until the year of his death, see e.g. Telle, 'Zum *Opus mago-cabbalisticum*', pp. 371 and 374; Telle, *Alchemie und Poesie*, p. 151, n. 14. Telle also employs the adjective 'theoalchemisch', as well as 'Theoalchemist' to designate practitioners, later replaced by the more neutral 'Theoalchemiker' that sought to avoid negative connotations and highlight the close relation between alchemists and chemists not reflected in ordinary German usage (*Alchemist* vs. *Chemiker*). For an appreciation of Telle's scholarly *œuvre*, see Kahn, 'Joachim Telle'.

goal, of which silver and gold were but symbols'.⁷⁶ Principe notes that this distinction goes back all the way to Atwood in 1850.⁷⁷ In view of these origins, it is not surprising that this distinction boils down to the dichotomy of alchemy (esoteric) and chemistry (exoteric), projected back into the distant past. Furthermore, the research of Newman and Principe powerfully questions preconceptions of what was exoteric and esoteric about early-modern alchemy. Their work on the laboratory notebooks of American chymist George Starkey (1628–65) and the alchemical treatises of his *alter ego*, the adept Eirenaeus Philalethes, suggests that the mysterious, symbolic and allegorical writings were, in fact, the exoteric or public face of alchemy, while the private notebooks containing records of laboratory experimentation would be the esoteric and private aspect.⁷⁸ The insights of the New Historiography completely invert the traditional understanding of this dichotomy. A closely related dichotomy is that of 'material alchemy' and 'spiritual alchemy'.⁷⁹ Once more, it basically boils down to the old dichotomy of chemistry and alchemy debunked by the New Historiography.

Another important term, 'spiritual alchemy', is shrouded by considerable confusion: it is used both to describe etic approaches to alchemy and emic content in historical sources. This confusion is particularly apparent in the critique of Principe and Newman presented by Călian, who initially describes 'a wide range of nuances in interpreting alchemy under a relatively common comprehension that I would label "spiritual alchemy."' ⁸⁰ Yet already in the accompanying footnote Călian then defines 'the established phrase' as referring to 'speculative, esoteric, and non-laboratory practices'.⁸¹ Again, on a single page he talks about 'the spiritual alchemy hypothesis' and then criticizes Principe and Newman's 'rejection of spiritual alchemy, which is difficult to sustain in the case of many alchemical texts', pointing at something that supposedly has an obvious and independent existence.⁸² The problem here

⁷⁶ E.g. Ronca, 'Religious Symbolism', pp. 95–96.

⁷⁷ Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 98.

⁷⁸ Newman, *Gehennical Fire*; Newman & Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*; Newman & Principe, 'The Chymical Laboratory Notebooks of George Starkey'; Starkey, *Alchemical Laboratory Notebooks*.

⁷⁹ E.g. Voss, 'Spiritual Alchemy', p. 151. Voss's study is heavily indebted to Eliade and exemplary for what Principe and Newman argue against.

⁸⁰ Călian, '*Alkimia Operativa* and *Alkimia Speculativa*', p. 166. Incidentally, this is also the understanding of Principe and Newman, who use the phrase as shorthand for 'The "Spiritual" Interpretation of Alchemy'; see Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', p. 388.

⁸¹ Călian, '*Alkimia Operativa* and *Alkimia Speculativa*', p. 166, n. 2.

⁸² Călian, '*Alkimia Operativa* and *Alkimia Speculativa*', p. 174.

is not that either of these meanings attached to the term ‘spiritual alchemy’ (interpretive approach vs. historic ideas/practices) are wrong: in fact, it is crucial to perceive that the interpretive approach to alchemy as something religious or spiritual has a very rich history of its own. It is, however, crucial to keep these two significations of spiritual alchemy apart. Only if we reserve the term ‘spiritual alchemy’ for precisely circumscribed historical and textual phenomena can it serve as a useful category for analysis. Similarly, in his full-length study on Boyle, Principe rejects the label but points to ‘a barely recognized school of supernatural alchemy’, which held that the philosophers’ stone would facilitate communication with angels.⁸³ However, one might challenge the use of ‘supernatural’ by noting that early-moderns viewed angels as part of God’s created order and thus as natural beings themselves: Boehme reminded his readers of the truism that ‘angels are natural, after all’.⁸⁴ If this is taken into consideration, Principe’s term risks importing the anachronistic implications of our modern understanding of the supernatural. Despite the confusion surrounding the term ‘spiritual alchemy’ and the various alternatives scholars have proposed, I shall show that there is no term better suited to the phenomenon I investigate.

One of the ways in which ‘spiritual alchemy’ has been defined suffers from too expansive an understanding that basically identifies it with what has more appropriately been called the emblematic worldview of the early-modern period.⁸⁵ In his 2003 study on Michael Maier, Tilton explicitly used the term ‘spiritual alchemy’ to refer to ‘a natural extension of the theory of microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence, and the notion of a vital spirit animating humans, animals, vegetables and minerals alike’.⁸⁶ However, in a more recent 2012 paper, Tilton acknowledges that this very broad definition would better be associated with an alternative, more precise term, *alchymia archetypica*, coined by Maier’s contemporary, the English nobleman and physician Robert Fludd (1574–1637): according to Fludd’s Platonic cosmology, there was a higher plane of reality on which ‘supernatural processes’ of alchemy take

⁸³ Principe, *The Aspiring Adept*, pp. 188–208, on p. 197. See also Principe & Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, pp. 399–400.

⁸⁴ Boehme, *Erste Apologia wider Balthasar Tilken* (1677), p. 91 (AT1, § 346). ‘Sind doch die Engel natürlich’. In the history of science, the ontological status of fallen angels – demons and even the devil himself – as natural has received greater attention; see e.g. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, ch. 11; Henry, ‘The Fragmentation of Renaissance Occultism’, pp. 8–12 and 15.

⁸⁵ See the classic paper by Ashworth, ‘Natural History and the Emblematic World View’. See also Foucault, *The Order of Things*, ch. 2. For a critique of Foucault, see Maclean, ‘Foucault’s Renaissance Episteme Reassessed’.

⁸⁶ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, pp. 33–34.

place, which were mirrored both in the macrocosm and the microcosm.⁸⁷ Apart from correspondences and analogies, widespread Christian convictions also come into play. In this regard, Dobbs writes of ‘the assimilation of alchemy to Christianity’.⁸⁸ The emblematic and Christian tendencies of the early-modern worldview meet in the important *lapis-Christus* analogy, based on which many alchemists drew parallels between Jesus Christ and the philosophers’ stone.⁸⁹ As this understanding of spiritual alchemy is so broad as to potentially subsume all elements in alchemy that hark back to any worldview or religion from antiquity onwards, I do not deem it a useful category for historical inquiry. It boils down to the commonplace of externalist history of science that all attempts to understand nature are inevitably shaped by the cultural context within which they are made.⁹⁰ And it is in the very same sense that Principe and Newman insistently argue that alchemy was neither more nor less religious than other forms of natural philosophy throughout the early-modern period: all of them were pursued against the backdrop of Christianity and the emblematic worldview. Whether we call this worldview spiritual alchemy or *alchymia archetypica* (which is more useful but perhaps too specific), it turns out not to be distinctive for alchemy, and therefore it is simply not possible to argue that alchemy was more religious than other branches of natural philosophy on its basis.

The way forward is demonstrated in Tilton’s 2012 paper on ‘Alchymia Archetypica’. Tilton outlines various trajectories by which different forms of spiritual alchemy (here used as an umbrella term for historical phenomena) can be traced throughout history along the lines of what he calls ‘the Western esoteric traditions’, in which he also squarely places Jung and other modern proponents of spiritual interpretations of alchemy.⁹¹ Tilton’s approach to classify ‘the wide variety of ideas and practices that have been cast together under the rubric of this contested historical

⁸⁷ Tilton, ‘Alchymia Archetypica’, p. 195.

⁸⁸ Dobbs, ‘From the Secrecy of Alchemy to the Openness of Chemistry’, p. 77.

⁸⁹ In a 1937 *Eranos* lecture, Jung was among the first to draw attention to how widespread this phenomenon was; in revised and expanded form, this lecture became part of Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, ‘Die Lapis-Christus-Parallele’, pp. 395–491.

⁹⁰ For a condensed summary of the internalist/externalist debate in the history of science, see Henry, *The Scientific Revolution* (2008), p. 7. For an introductory textbook to externalist history of science, see e.g. Barnes, et al., *Scientific Knowledge*.

⁹¹ Tilton uses this phrase repeatedly: e.g. Tilton, ‘Alchymia Archetypica’, pp. 179, 180 and 208. He probably has in mind Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*. For a review and trenchant critique of this textbook’s underlying assumptions, see Hanegraaff, ‘Textbooks and Introductions’, pp. 189–93. In his earlier book, Tilton argued specifically that Jung consciously styled himself as heir to such traditions; see Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, pp. 3, 17, 21–23 and 254.

category' (that is, spiritual alchemy) is crucially important.⁹² One of the central tasks of a newly expanded historiography of alchemy is to carefully differentiate what both advocates and opponents of spiritual alchemy (here used as an umbrella term for interpretive approaches) indiscriminately lump together. Admittedly, many scholars show awareness of diverging spiritual interpretations. Principe and Newman actually make very clear that there are important differences between, say, the psychologizing approach of Jung and the vitalist emphasis of Eliade.⁹³ Yet so far Principe and Newman, as well as the advocates of Jung and Eliade, have considered the general similarity much more important than the subtle differences. This approach will have to be reversed if meaningful accounts of different spiritual alchemies are to be part of the agenda of a newly expanded historiography of alchemy.

In my own use of the term 'spiritual alchemy', I initially employ it in a manner similar to that in which a number of literary scholars have used it: as a description of metaphors and allegories derived from transmutational, laboratory alchemy.⁹⁴ As such, it can take many different forms depending on how the source domain of alchemy is mapped onto the target domains of, say, spiritual rebirth, salvation, deification or the propagation of the Gospel.⁹⁵ Particularly Canadian literary scholar Robert M. Schuler has drawn attention to this for seventeenth-century England and consciously used 'the unorthodox plural' to highlight that 'alchemy was subject to a variety of religious interpretations'.⁹⁶ Strictly speaking, then, all the figures discussed throughout this study developed their own, distinctive spiritual alchemies. Nevertheless, despite the plurality of spiritual alchemies in the sense of diverging metaphorical mappings, I argue that there are enough common defining features to conclude that a

For a perceptive critique of the pitfalls associated with 'tradition' in the study of Western esotericism, see e.g. Asprem & Granholm, 'Constructing Esotericisms'. See also Kilcher, 'Introduction'.

⁹² Tilton, 'Alchymia Archetypica', p. 180.

⁹³ Principe & Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', pp. 401–4 and 408–12, resp.

⁹⁴ Schuler, 'Some Spiritual Alchemies'; Keller, 'Spiritual Alchemy in Donne's Final Sermon'; Kensak, 'Spiritual Alchemy and the Ending of *The Canterbury Tales*'; Shrieves, 'Spiritual Alchemy through Embodied Hieroglyphs'.

⁹⁵ My analysis of such conceptual metaphors is informed by the classic study of Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. For studies on conceptual metaphor in literature and culture, respectively, see also Lakoff & Turner, *More than Cool Reason*; Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture*.

⁹⁶ Schuler, 'Some Spiritual Alchemies', p. 294. Unfortunately, Schuler's interpretations of his sources seem rather far-fetched in view of the New Historiography. The plural form is also used by Caron in Hanegraaff, et al., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. 'Alchemy V: 19th–20th Century', on p. 51.

single spiritual alchemy was shared, transmitted and/or semi-independently rediscovered from Boehme to Atwood. I define spiritual alchemy as *the practical pursuit of inward but physically real transmutation*, understood as a reversal of the consequences of the Fall and a preparation for the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgment. Spiritual alchemy is thus closely connected to the idea of spiritual rebirth, which it helped shape and by which it was shaped in turn.

The detailed chapters that follow amount to the first comprehensive account that supplies ‘clear historical evidence’ for what Principe and Newman originally brushed off as a mere ‘conjecture’:⁹⁷ that there was continuity from the early-modern to the modern era regarding spiritual alchemy, ultimately giving rise to a plurality of spiritual alchemies that yet remain to be charted in detail. Even more strikingly, I shall show that Atwood was a direct heiress to these early-modern interpretations, which Principe and Newman categorically rule out: while they view Hitchcock’s moral alchemy as analogous to alchemical tropes used in religious contexts throughout the early-modern era, this ‘has nothing in common with the “spiritual alchemy” that stems from Atwood and her followers’.⁹⁸ I beg to differ. Indeed, my findings will bear out that the brief passage F. Sherwood Taylor (1897–1956) devoted to this issue could hardly have been more accurate: in *The Alchemists* (1949), an older survey praised by Principe, Taylor noted ‘the existence of a school of mystical alchemists whose purpose was self-regeneration’.⁹⁹ With Boehme as an important early exponent, ‘[t]his tendency culminated in 1850’ with Atwood’s *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*.¹⁰⁰ This study traces the continued existence of the spiritual alchemy of rebirth (for which *regeneratio* was the technical equivalent in Latin) in heterodox and specifically Boehmist circles from 1600 to the second half of the nineteenth century.

Apart from the fact that, from Boehme onward, all the figures studied here drew, whether directly or indirectly, on his theosophy, the key elements of this alchemy can be listed as follows: 1) a three-way *lapis-Christus in nobis* analogy between the philosophers’ stone, Christ incarnate and the believer, who is mystically identified with Christ; 2) a physical process – construed as rebirth, deification, mystical union or all of these at once – towards restoring the prelapsarian body, characterized as subtle or spiritual, in preparation for life in Heaven; 3) the practical pursuit of that physical process through devotional acts or mystical paths, which are described in terms of

⁹⁷ Principe & Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, p. 400.

⁹⁸ Principe & Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, p. 399.

⁹⁹ Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 227. Comp. Principe, ‘Alchemy Restored’, p. 307.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 228.

alchemical techniques or the stages of the great work. Spiritual alchemy, as understood here, is thus both physical or material and practical. The first element harks back to the more traditional *lapis-Christus* analogy but significantly expands it by including the believer. Mystical identification of Christ and the believer could be summed up in a single phrase: *Christus in nobis*, the notion that Christ dwells within the believer and that the believer mystically relives Christ's life on a daily basis. In the seventeenth century, this phrase became popular among heterodox circles. Through the immediate access to the divine guaranteed by the divine *logos* dwelling within the individual believer, the implications of *Christus in nobis* effectively made the clergy, the church and at times even the Bible unnecessary.¹⁰¹ The second element shows that, even though this spiritual alchemy clearly did originate as a metaphor or conceit, it did not remain so but came to be viewed as literally describing the transfiguration of the human body through rebirth and resurrection. With regard to the resurrection of the dead, the second element is, in fact, quite amenable to Lutheran orthodoxy: the great Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) himself had praised alchemy as a visible demonstration for this article of faith, and a court alchemist's obituary explicitly called it 'spiritual alchemy' in 1659.¹⁰² Crucially, however, the orthodox understanding reserves agency solely for God. The third element is the practice of spiritual alchemy, by which the individual believer actively nourishes the new birth within, through prayer, penitence, ascetic acts or other rituals. All three elements depart from Lutheran orthodoxy by internalizing Christ, emphasizing rebirth and requiring individual agency, respectively.

¹⁰¹ The phrase and concept is older than this, appearing also in German mysticism and Reformation debates (often opposed to *Christus pro nobis*), but it came to be defining for spiritualist dissent throughout the seventeenth century; see Hannak, *Geist=reiche Kritik*, pp. 128, 154 and 215–16. The most elaborate attack on the spiritualist understanding of Christ is mounted by Colberg, *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690/91), vol. 2, ch. V: 'Von Christo'. See also Schmidt, 'Christian Hoburg and Seventeenth-Century Mysticism', p. 53; Lehmann-Brauns, *Weisheit in der Weltgeschichte*, pp. 140 and 164; Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis* (English), pp. 190–92 and 202–7.

¹⁰² Schneider, *Gläubiger Christen Hertzens-Freude*, f. G1r. 'Geistliche Alchymia'. The print publication dates from 1662; one might note as well that the deceased alchemist was exceedingly heterodox: Benedict Hinckelmann, who hosted Boehme during his time in Dresden in 1624, amassed a very significant collection of heterodox manuscripts, offered for sale in 1692, as catalogued in a contemporary periodical: Tentzel, 'Theologica Manuscripta'. The now-defunct University of Helmstedt acquired the collection, which – stripped of some of its treasures – is now preserved at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel. For Luther's *locus classicus* and a recent discussion, see Luther, *Tischreden* (WA), vol. 1, nr. 1149; Nummedal, 'Alchemy and Religion', pp. 311–12.

The Meanings of Spirit

Unlike some other terms that scholars have employed to study the relation between alchemy and religion, spiritual alchemy has a number of emic approximations. Here are several examples, along with the dates of the documents within which they occur: ‘divine alchemy’ (before 1614), ‘mystical alchemy’ (1686), ‘spiritual *chrysopoeia*’ (1657) and, of course, ‘spiritual alchemy’ in both Latin (1633) and German (1659) – even English ‘Spiritual Chymistry’ (1656), German ‘spiritual *chymia*’ (1709) and ‘true spiritual *chymia*’ (1742) appear.¹⁰³ As an etic term, spiritual alchemy has little to do with contemporary notions of spirituality. Huss notes that spirituality is now frequently defined ‘in opposition to religion’, which contrasts with ‘the early modern and modern perceptions of spirituality as a subcategory, or the essence of religion’.¹⁰⁴ However, while some of the figures studied here indeed viewed the spiritual alchemy of rebirth as defining for true Christianity, that is not the main point. Instead, I mean to draw attention to early-modern notions of *spiritus* – a term that carried a bewildering array of meanings in vastly different contexts, particularly medicine and theology, but also anthropology, cosmology and, last but not least, alchemy. The very vagueness of the term was decisive, as it oscillated between the divine and the physical, between medical and theological anthropology, between the matter of heaven and the products of the alchemist’s distillery. English intellectual historian D. P. Walker (1914–85) has perceptively noted that the plurality of meanings attached to the term *spiritus* could give rise to ‘dangerous contaminations or confusions’ that might ‘lead towards religious unorthodoxies’.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Pseudo-Weigel (Schleswig, LASH: Abt. 7, Nr. 2059: 3), f. 2v counting from the title. ‘Gottliche Alchimiam’. Fludd, *Clavis philosophiæ et alchymiae*, pp. 75 and 83. ‘Alchymia spiritualis’. Sclei, *Theosophische-Schriefften*, ‘Register Über die sämptlichen Schriefften D. B. Sclei’, s.v. ‘Alchymia Mystica’. Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, bk. I, nr. 102. ‘Geistliche Goldmachung’. Schneider, *Gläubiger Christen Hertzens-Freude*, f. G1r. ‘Geistliche Alchymia’. Hooker, *The Application of Redemption*, vol. 2, p. 218. – Maul, *Medicina theologica, chymico irenica, et christiano-cabbalistica* (1713), pp. 590 and 600. ‘Geistliche Chymiam’ or ‘Chymie’, resp. Haug, *Die Heilige Schrift* (Berleburger Bibel), vol. 8, ‘Haupt-Register’, s.v. ‘Chymie wahre geistliche’. (On the fascinating project of the Berleburg Bible, see e.g. Brecht, ‘Die Berleburger Bibel’; Urlinger, *Die ... Bedeutung der Berleburger Bibel*.) The occurrence of such terms is also noted by Principe & Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, p. 398. For mentions of ‘Spiritual Chemists’ or a ‘spiritual alchemist’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively, see also Willard, ‘Two Early References’; Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁴ Huss, ‘Spirituality Is Not Religion’, p. 101.

¹⁰⁵ Walker, ‘The Astral Body’, p. 120. See also Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*.

American medical historian Katharine Park summarizes the general medical understanding as follows: *spiritus* was ‘a subtle vapour or exhalation produced from blood and disseminated throughout the body’ and served as the soul’s instrument to control ‘all activity in the living body’.¹⁰⁶ In a clear hierarchy, spirit thus mediated between the more noble soul and the inferior body. Credited with the recovery of Platonic philosophy for the early-modern world, the Florentine physician, philosopher and translator Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) extended this scheme to the macrocosm and posited the spirit of the world (*spiritus mundi*) as a subtle matter that mediated between the soul of the world (*anima mundi*) and the material world.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, he identified the *spiritus mundi* as the quintessence and transmuting agent of alchemy.¹⁰⁸ In doing so, Ficino inspired many alchemists to pursue the *spiritus mundi* for centuries to come.¹⁰⁹ Partly inspired by Ficino, partly predating him, the situation gets exceptionally tangled in alchemy. In a popular collection of alchemical texts, for instance, the roles of spirit and soul are swapped and we read that ‘spirit and body are one, through mediation of the soul’.¹¹⁰ German medical historian Marielene Putscher (1919–97) notes that this is not an isolated occurrence and states that it is frequently difficult to assess ‘whether soul or spirit is the medium that establishes the connection to the body’.¹¹¹ Furthermore, in the theory of the three principles popularized by Paracelsus (ca. 1493–1541) and his followers, mercury, sulphur and salt corresponded to spirit, soul and body.¹¹²

Alchemical Paracelsianism, of which more will be said below, definitely contributed to the new-found popularity of a trichotomous anthropology, departing from the dichotomous version espoused by Aristotelian philosophy and Lutheran theology. On the trichotomous view, popular among religious dissenters in the late sixteenth

¹⁰⁶ Park, ‘The Organic Soul’, p. 469.

¹⁰⁷ Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. ‘Marsilio Ficino’, 4. (Legacy) and 3.4 (Ethics, Love), resp.

¹⁰⁸ Matton, ‘Marsile Ficin et l’alchimie’, esp. pp. 142–48. Comp. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, pp. 254/55–56/57 (bk. 3, ch. III).

¹⁰⁹ Apart from Matton’s study, see e.g. Hirai, ‘The World-Spirit and Quintessence’.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous, *Artis Auriferae ... volumen primum* (1593), ‘In Turbam Philosophorum Exercitationes’, nr. XIV, on p. 180. ‘Spiritus et corpus unum sunt mediante anima’.

¹¹¹ Putscher, *Pneuma, Spiritus, Geist*, p. 72. ‘Die Schwierigkeit, zu sagen, ob Seele oder Geist das Medium sei, das die Verbindung zum Körper herstellt, zieht sich durch die Medizin- wie Philosophiegeschichte seit der Antike.’

¹¹² The triad of body, soul and spirit occurs in alchemical texts predating Paracelsus, yet he formalized their analogy with salt, sulphur and mercury while elevating the latter three to great importance as fundamental principles; see Hooykaas, ‘Chemical Trichotomy’.

and throughout the seventeenth century, spirit could refer to the divine spark, either pre-existent within man and awaiting activation or implanted through the new birth.¹¹³ From the perspective of Lutheran theology, the crux was that the third component (whether called spirit or soul) was not only immortal but divine: it was, quite literally, a part of God and would return to God after death.¹¹⁴ This view could have far-reaching heterodox implications, and in the late seventeenth century, Lutheran heresy hunter Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659–98) described ‘the delusion of the three substantial parts of man’ as the foundational error of ‘Platonic-Hermetic Christianity’, from which all other heresies flowed.¹¹⁵ Sometimes this third component was effectively tied to an internalized *Christus in nobis* or participation in Christ’s heavenly body. With allusions to the concept of *spiritus mundi*, spirit could become the physical substance of the new birth and the resurrected body, as well as the stuff of the Kingdom of Heavens. An eighteenth-century heir of Boehme, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–87) used the term ‘spirit bodiliness’ (*Geistlichkeit*) to articulate a notion of subtle physicality that defies the hard-and-fast modern distinction between immaterial mind and matter.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the Gospel of John (4: 24) explicitly identifies God and spirit, and the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s human body, in turn, led Boehme to identify the *spiritus* that permeates the universe with Christ.¹¹⁷ The interplay, interference or even conflation of these various notions of spirit is crucial but often remains implicit. In an important way, therefore, the spiritual alchemy of rebirth is the alchemy of *spiritus* as the subtle matter of the new

¹¹³ Throughout the seventeenth century, several academic disputations attacked this position from the perspective of Lutheran orthodoxy: e.g. Winckelmann & Werner, *Disputatio Theologica De partibus Hominis*; Thumm, et al., *Brevis Consideratio Trium Quaestionum*; Wiedeburg & Wiedeburg, *Disputatio Theologica Inauguralis*. See also Hunnius, *Christliche Betrachtung*. For important pointers in scholarly literature, see e.g. Hannak, *Geist=reiche Kritik*, pp. 61–62, 104–5, 191–93, 205–6 and 210; Poortman, *Vehicles of Consciousness*, vol. 1, pp. 43–45 and 55; vol. 2, pp. 76–77, 101 and 130–31; vol. 3, pp. 7–12.

¹¹⁴ Winckelmann & Werner, *Disputatio Theologica De partibus Hominis*, f. A2v; Wiedeburg & Wiedeburg, *Disputatio Theologica Inauguralis*, f. A2v.

¹¹⁵ Colberg, *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690/91), vol. 1, pp. 3–4. ‘Wahn von den drey wesentlichen Stücken des Menschen’. On Colberg, see Schneider, ‘Das Platonisch-hermetische Christenthum’; Lehmann-Brauns, *Weisheit in der Weltgeschichte*, ch. III; Hanegraaff, ‘The Birth of Esotericism’; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, pp. 107–14.

¹¹⁶ Comp. Hanegraaff, *Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant*, pp. 70–85 and the notes on pp. 132–33 (n. 116), 134 (n. 132) and 136 (n. 146).

¹¹⁷ On this doctrine, see the fascinating, monograph-length paper by Baur, ‘Ubiquität’. On Boehme in this connection, see Chapter I.5.

birth, the Kingdom of Heaven and Christ's human body turned heavenly. Through the spiritual alchemy of rebirth, believers could *literally* become members of Christ's body, as the Pauline metaphor put it (1 Corinthians 12: 12–27).

Lastly, it is important to note that spiritual alchemy as researched in this study is closely related to what Tilton calls 'alchemically conceived theurgy' but also clearly distinct from it.¹¹⁸ He defines theurgy as 'the magical procurement of communication with benevolent spirits, most commonly for the purpose of gaining knowledge, producing miracles or attaining union with the divine'.¹¹⁹ Alchemically conceived theurgy then employs 'the symbols of alchemy ... to describe the theurgical processes themselves, in particular the gnostic heavenly ascent and angelification or self-deification'.¹²⁰ Through his terms and definitions, Tilton suggests that alchemically conceived theurgy was dangerously heterodox – in fact, he even goes so far as casting aspersion on the Apostle Paul, 'otherwise a bulwark of orthodoxy', by guilt of association.¹²¹ This is clearly too limited an understanding of orthodox Christian doctrine, which in fact provides ample room and inspiration for speculating on 'the transfigured body of the resurrection' and deification.¹²² Particularly in the Eastern churches, deification – becoming a partaker of divine nature – is the primary doctrine of salvation, and many church fathers subscribed to it.¹²³ In this sense, most of the figures encountered throughout this study viewed themselves as orthodox and even laid claims to a truer faith than their detractors within the institutional churches.¹²⁴ Specific doctrines, such as bodily transfiguration, cannot be straightforwardly identified as heterodox, as questions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are much too complex to allow for uncontextualized blanket judgments. When I nonetheless occasionally describe spiritual alchemy as heterodox, this is not a general statement but one made against the highly specific context of orthodox Lutheranism during the seventeenth century.

The most important difference, however, is that spiritual alchemy ceases to be metaphorical, unlike alchemically conceived theurgy. Boehme and his later disciples believed that actual physical changes were taking place within them, as they

¹¹⁸ Tilton, 'Alchymia Archetypica', pp. 192–206, on p. 192.

¹¹⁹ Tilton, 'Alchymia Archetypica', p. 187.

¹²⁰ Tilton, 'Alchymia Archetypica', p. 192.

¹²¹ Tilton, 'Alchymia Archetypica', p. 180.

¹²² Tilton, 'Alchymia Archetypica', p. 180.

¹²³ E.g. Christensen & Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*; Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*.

¹²⁴ This esoteric take on Christianity has also been highlighted by Neugebauer-Wölk, 'Esoterik und Christentum', esp. pp. 144–46 on rebirth.

pursued the spiritual alchemy of rebirth and its processes.¹²⁵ Irrespective of what we might think of this nowadays, historians have to suspend their disbelief and accept the content of these beliefs as real in precisely the same way as the sun used to revolve around the earth, astrological influence determined the fate of individuals and nations, and (perhaps most appropriately) many alchemists successfully transmuted lesser metals into gold and had witnesses to tell the tale. From a historical perspective, it is a moot point to note that these views no longer have a place in our current understanding of the world: borrowing a phrase coined by E. P. Thompson (1924–93), historian of astrology Patrick Curry has described this as ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’ that privileges winners over losers among both historical actors and ideas.¹²⁶ In her study on *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (2007), Tara Nummedal makes this point with particular clarity: ‘Whatever we think of alchemy today, it is essential to remember that many people accepted the basic principles of alchemy in early modern Europe, even the transmutation of metals, and could point to religious and natural philosophical justification for their belief.’ For all intents and purposes of historical inquiry, ‘we must accept that, in the eyes of early modern Europeans’, alchemists ‘did indeed transmute metals’.¹²⁷ While those who gave credence to the physical reality of spiritual alchemy would admittedly have been encountered in numbers much smaller than those who practised laboratory alchemy, this circumstance does not diminish the general validity of the point.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES ON MANUSCRIPTS AND SCRIBAL PUBLICATION

After initially probing early-modern printed publications for spiritual alchemy with very limited success, I have come to rely on the manuscript record to a very significant extent. Apart from the more familiar form of correspondence, the framework of scribal publication can account for continued reliance on the medium of manuscript

¹²⁵ An earlier precursor could be seen in the *Opusculum de bombyce* (ca. 1492–94), a poem in 254 lines by Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500), particularly the passage discussed by Hanegraaff & Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, pp. 54–56. For a modern edition, see Roellenbleck, ‘Lazzarelli, *Opusculum de bombyce*’. In this respect, the specific context in which the doctrine of rebirth gained traction and the Boehmists, among whom spiritual alchemy developed, are crucial: in contrast to Lazzarelli, Boehme succeeded in forming something that might be called a school of early-modern alchemy.

¹²⁶ Curry, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 2.

¹²⁷ Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority*, p. 16.

in the age of print. Particularly the pioneering study by the Australian literary scholar Harold Love (1937–2007) on *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (1993) was a decisive eye-opener in this regard.¹²⁸ Though Love focused on the scribal dissemination of news, poetry and music in England, I have found many of his insights on early-modern scribal culture equally applicable to networks of religious dissenters in the Holy Roman Empire and the United Provinces. To date there is no study of scribal publication in these circles, though scholars have commented on the strategies they employed in their epistolary networks, and there are important studies taking stock of the manuscript heritage attributed to individual authors, most notably Paracelsus, Valentin Weigel (1533–88) and Boehme.¹²⁹ The crucial limitation of these studies is that they are predominantly concerned with questions of authenticity; they thus deal with manuscript transmission as a necessary evil ultimately to be overcome by philological scholarship, rather than an important historical phenomenon in its own right. Due to the heterodox views expressed in the texts such dissidents communicated, a shortage of financial means as well as potentially complex, artful content, manuscript rather than print was the medium of choice for many of this study's protagonists.

Additionally, due to its greater intimacy, the medium of manuscript can in many cases be tied more specifically to individual actors and their actions. This makes it easier to trace owners and readers, thus allowing me to more accurately chart the chain of transmission not only of ideas but of their material carriers as well. Throughout my research, the most valuable repositories of sources have been historic collections of manuscripts, ideally formed by known collectors. Beyond this, the circulation of texts in manuscript is a powerful explanatory framework that aids in making sense of isolated and otherwise baffling facts. There are, however, some unwelcome side-effects of scribal publication. Whereas first editions are usually considered reliable by default, it can be considerably less straightforward to decide whether one manuscript is more authoritative than the other. In choosing a particular version of a given text as the main witness, I have employed different criteria depending on the situation: these include, among others, philological comparison, dating, provenance and prior reception or accessibility. Additionally, many works transmitted in manuscript pose problems of attribution with varying degrees of severity. Once again, it

¹²⁸ Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts*. For a shorter presentation, see Love & Marotti, 'Manuscript Transmission and Circulation'.

¹²⁹ E.g. Kühlmann, 'Paracelsismus und Häresie'; Penman, 'Prophecy, Alchemy, and Strategies of Dissident Communication'. See also Sudhoff, *Versuch einer Kritik der Echtheit*; Pfefferl, *Teildruck*; Buddecke, *Böhme-Handschriften*; Buddecke & Wenzel, *Verzeichnis der Handschriften*.

is Love who recently wrote an important introduction to the subject: *Attributing Authorship* (2002).¹³⁰ Along the way, I have therefore attempted to debunk mistaken attributions, to consolidate existing ones that may not yet have received due attention and, of course, to establish new ones.

Over and beyond questions of attribution and perhaps not entirely in keeping with much recent scholarship and its theory-laden approaches eager to make a point, I took the liberty to occasionally focus on details or fill lacunae in previous scholarship in the attempt to establish historical facts. A recent attempt to theorize such an approach, Robert D. Hume's *Reconstructing Contexts* (1999), powerfully makes the case that interpretations will invariably change, but a historical fact, once established, can prove meaningful for generations of later researchers: 'Clever readings come and go (most vanishing without trace in short order), but a new *fact* adds to a permanent store of knowledge' on which future historians will be able to draw.¹³¹ In the age of fake news and alternative facts, there is, perhaps, also a new value to such an approach. Similarly, in the attempt to move away from the elaborate theorisations proposed by Jung, Eliade and others, I have included a copious amount of quotations from sources, many of which are obscure, rare or otherwise difficult to access. The spiritual alchemy I have sought to describe is primarily documented in texts; if accompanied by the requisite explanations, the language of the sources actually speaks for itself to a significant extent. Although some readers might find this approach cumbersome, it actually serves an important role in countering the charge that spiritual alchemy was primarily a modern form of interpretation projected back onto earlier sources.

HISTORICAL PRELUDE

Before delving into an exploration of the largely obscure origins of the spiritual alchemy of rebirth, I would like to describe the backdrop against which it was first developed in broad strokes. In an important sense, the alchemy of spiritual rebirth at the origins of born-again Christianity appears to be a quintessentially German affair. In stark contrast to most other European languages, which use the Latin term *regeneratio* or its vernacular derivatives (e.g. French *régénération*), German features the graphic *Wiedergeburt* for rebirth or the new birth, which Christ discussed in the Gospel of John (3: 1–8).¹³² In 'The Study of Spiritual Alchemy' (1990), Daniel Merkur

¹³⁰ Love, *Attributing Authorship*.

¹³¹ Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts*, p. 32.

¹³² Comp. DWB, s.v. 'Wi(e)dergebären', 'Wi(e)dergebärung' and esp. 'Wi(e)dergeburt'. While

attempted to pinpoint the origins of ‘alchemical mysticism’ by gesturing to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but his references to medieval Grail romances are unconvincing and his fast-paced discussion of the term ‘spiritual alchemy’ predates the paradigm shift of the New Historiography by several years.¹³³ The actual story of spiritual alchemy in the precise sense investigated here begins towards the very end of the sixteenth century, as the German-speaking world witnessed the confluence of two important currents, the older one of German mysticism from Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) onwards and the more recent development of alchemical Paracelsianism.¹³⁴ An underground network, in which Weigelian, Paracelsian and associated pseudepigraphic works circulated, became the melting pot for German mysticism and alchemical Paracelsianism. In this context, the abstract language of rebirth that had already baffled the Pharisee Nicodemus was further made tangible with reference to the concrete phenomena of alchemy.¹³⁵

Taking up impulses from German mysticism and the radical Reformation, a motley handful of religious dissenters picked up on the notion of spiritual rebirth around 1600.¹³⁶ The preconditions for this to occur were provided by Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig (1489–1561) and Weigel, among others.¹³⁷ The ‘new birth’ was central to

English Bible translations from John Wycliffe (1320–84) use the phrase ‘born again’ and ‘reborn’ first appears in 1598, the earliest example listed for the noun ‘rebirth’ stems from the very late eighteenth century (1790); comp. OED, ‘born, adj.’ (2. b.); ‘reborn, adj.’; ‘rebirth, n.’.

¹³³ Merkur, ‘The Study of Spiritual Alchemy’, pp. 39 and 42–43.

¹³⁴ For a recent study on the most influential medieval German mystic, Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328), see e.g. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*. German scholars have proposed the term *Alchemoparacelsismus*, which I translate here; see e.g. Kühlmann & Telle, *Frühparacelsismus I*, ‘Einleitung’, pp. 16 and 26. An exemplary survey may be found in Paulus, ‘Alchemie und Paracelsismus um 1600’. In Anglophone scholarship, the futility of separating purer from less pure forms of Paracelsianism has been noted by Pumfrey, ‘The Spagyric Art’.

¹³⁵ References to rebirth occur in medieval German mysticism but seem to play a more marginal role. Some examples are listed and briefly discussed in Egerding, *Die Metaphorik der spätmittelalterlichen Mystik*, vol. 2, pp. 220 and 228–29 (Meister Eckhart); pp. 230 and 234 (Johannes Tauler); pp. 235 and 239–40 (Heinrich Seuse); pp. 240–41 (Heinrich von Nördlingen). Seuse’s definition of rebirth as the restoration of a fallen human being to the prelapsarian state (p. 239) is closely related to that of Boehme, as detailed in Chapter I.5; see also Chapter IV.2 on Freher.

¹³⁶ This development is ignored in a dated study that yet remains the only monograph on the doctrine of rebirth in the history of theology: Gennrich, *Die Lehre von der Wiedergeburt*. For a discussion of early views on baptism in the radical Reformation, see Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, pp. 300–19. On p. 304, Williams notes that the ‘interiorization or spiritualization of baptism’ began, among others, with Caspar Schwenckfeld.

¹³⁷ For a full-length study in English, see Weeks, *Valentin Weigel*.

Schwenckfeld's theology, and the Reformer of Silesia had many adherents, particularly in his native land, into the seventeenth century and beyond.¹³⁸ After a quiet life as a superficially unremarkable pastor in the Saxon town of Zschopau, Weigel posthumously embarked on an impressive career as a heretic, and throughout the seventeenth century, his name came to be synonymous with what scholars now call spiritualism: orthodox clergy and authorities aggressively cracked down on Weigelians.¹³⁹ Weigel also read and copied Paracelsus, and his writings featured a new insistence on rebirth construed as a material process.¹⁴⁰ Schwenckfeld and Weigel caused a dissociation of baptism and rebirth. Originally, the terms were largely synonymous in Lutheran practice: sermons and obituaries habitually spoke of 'holy baptism and the bath of rebirth', effectively conflating the two.¹⁴¹ While most of them had been baptized as infants, Schwenckfeldians, Weigelians and Lutheran spiritualists came to dismiss outward rites as ineffective due to their spiritualist convictions. They therefore turned rebirth into something that was distinct from baptism, purely interior, happening continually rather than just once. The baptism of infants or adults ritually imitates the death and resurrection of Christ once in their lives; rebirth does so daily through the mystical identification of Christ and the believer. Due to these shifts, spiritualists used rebirth to articulate an alternative Christianity, running counter to the church establishment they despised, claiming a truer faith of the few in contrast to the superstitious practices of the masses.

Particularly regarding the doctrine of justification, these dissenters departed from Lutheran orthodoxy as codified in the confessional writings. The position of Luther and Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560), as well as the Lutheran church in general, is often described as forensic.¹⁴² On this view, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer in a legal manner, per decree, as it were, irrespective of that believer's past or future actions. Among the second generation of Reformers, Weigel in particular positioned 'the new birth' as a replacement of this forensic understanding

¹³⁸ Furcha, 'Key Concepts in Caspar von Schwenckfeld's Thought'; Eberlein, *Ketzer oder Heiliger? Caspar von Schwenckfeld*, pp. 165–68. See also Weigelt, *Spiritualistische Tradition im Protestantismus*, esp. pp. 36–46; Weigelt, *Von Schlesien nach Amerika*.

¹³⁹ Wollgast, *Philosophie in Deutschland*, ch. 9, esp. pp. 522–34 and 576–600; Wollgast, 'Zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Paracelsus'.

¹⁴⁰ For a concise summary of Weigel's views on rebirth, see Schoeps, *Vom himmlischen Fleisch Christi*, pp. 56–62. Paracelsus preceded him in this regard; see Daniel, 'Paracelsus on Baptism'.

¹⁴¹ E.g. Zeilfelder, *Ungetaufter kinderlein Predigt*, title page. 'Heiligen Tauffe, unnd Bad der Widergeburt'. These phrases hark back to Titus 3: 5.

¹⁴² Fink, 'Was There a "Reformation Doctrine of Justification"?"

of justification.¹⁴³ In doing so, he preceded such towering figures as Johann Arndt (1555–1621) and, almost simultaneously, Jacob Boehme himself.¹⁴⁴ Arndt referred to the ‘new birth’ and ‘rebirth’ many times throughout his devotional bestseller, *Vier Bücher Vom wahren Christenthumb* (1605–09), parts of which had been lifted straight from Weigel’s writings, causing a controversy around Arndt and his work.¹⁴⁵ Alongside Weigel, it was probably Arndt who shaped Boehme’s views on the subject most, and Sibylle Rusterholz plausibly asserts that Boehme was familiar with Arndt’s voluminous work from early on.¹⁴⁶ In a rare instance of admitting to reading the works of others, Boehme expressed subdued praise for Weigel, who had written ‘beautifully on the new birth and the unity of humanity through Christ among us’. Yet Boehme went on to claim that ‘I described it [rebirth] more clearly in my writings’.¹⁴⁷ The eminent German church historian Martin Brecht lends support to this self-aggrandizing claim, as he notes that particularly Boehme came to exert a lasting impact in spreading the notion of spiritual rebirth among radical Pietists in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹⁴⁸ By way of Pietism and, particularly in England, Methodism, the idea of spiritual rebirth reached modern Evangelicalism, where it continues to thrive among born-again believers. The midwifing role of alchemy is now all but forgotten, yet this kind of Christianity continues to exist until today in congregations and communities that emphasize rebirth or in individuals that describe themselves as born again. Scholars of Evangelicalism and Pietism, such as W. R. Ward and Douglas H. Shantz, have perceptively noted that such debts to alchemy do exist in these movements.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ E.g. Weigel, *Neue Edition*, vol. 8: *Der Güldene Griff*, ch. XV, on p. 64. ‘Die neue geburt’.

¹⁴⁴ Gennrich has little to say about Arndt, next to nothing on Weigel and does not mention Boehme at all; Gennrich, *Die Lehre von der Wiedergeburt*, pp. 159, 161 (Weigel) and 161–64 (Arndt).

¹⁴⁵ Arndt, *Vier Bücher Von wahren Christenthumb* (1610), e.g. vol. 1, ‘Vorrede’, f. A3r; pp. 23 and 52; ch. 11. ‘Newe Geburt’; ‘Wiedergeburt’. These expressions are largely synonymous, though individual writers may exhibit a preference for one over the other. See also Geyer, *Verborgene Weisheit*, vol. 2, pp. 97–182. On the controversial early reception of Arndt, see Brecht, et al., *Geschichte des Pietismus*, vol. 1, pp. 142–51.

¹⁴⁶ Rusterholz, ‘*Liber Naturae und Liber Scripturae bei Jacob Böhme*’, esp. pp. 136 and 145.

¹⁴⁷ Boehme, *Theosophische Send-Schreiben* (1658), p. 149 (ET 12: 60). ‘Sonst schreibet auch Weigel von der neuen Gebuhr, und der Einigung der Menschheit in Christo mit uns, gar schöne, welches weil ichs in meinen Schriften was klärer beschrieben, alhie beruhen lasse’.

¹⁴⁸ Brecht, ‘Die deutschen Spiritualisten’, p. 212.

¹⁴⁹ Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, ch. 1; Shantz, ‘The Origin of Pietist Notions of New Birth’; Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism*, ch. 6, esp. pp. 154–58.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Paracelsian alchemists also played an important role in creating the underground network in which heterodox and alchemical texts circulated freely, side by side. Particularly Gerard Dorn (1530–84), Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605) and Oswald Croll (1563–1609) were remarkable for the extent to which religious concerns shaped their alchemical works.¹⁵⁰ Khunrath specifically used the Latin term *regeneratio* and its cognates, thus paving the way for the analogies between rebirth and alchemy developed by contemporaneous and later writers, including Johann Arndt.¹⁵¹ In his famous *Amphitheatrum sapientiae Aeternae* (1st ed. 1595), Khunrath was among the very first to explicitly posit an analogy between the Incarnation of Christ, the preparation of the philosophers' stone and the rebirth of the individual believer. The relevant statement appears in the vastly expanded edition of 1609, as part of a commentary on Solomon's sayings. Commenting on a verse of the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon (7: 30), Khunrath wrote the following:

Happy he to whom is shown, and having been shown rightly knows: the person, passion and resurrection of JHSVH CHRIST; the matter, preparation and more-than-perfection in the glorified body of the PHILOSOPHERS' STONE; and your rebirth [*regeneratio*], formed in the image and likeness of GOD according to body, spirit and soul.¹⁵²

In spite of the clarity of this passage, there are several reasons to look elsewhere for the beginning of the story to be told in these pages. Khunrath used the abstract Latin term *regeneratio* and did not dwell on this complex analogy to further explain it.

¹⁵⁰ In spite or because of C. G. Jung's enthusiasm, Dorn has received little scholarly attention; see, however, Kahn, 'Les débuts de Gérard Dorn'; Marquet, 'Philosophie et alchimie chez Gerhard Dorn'. On Khunrath, see Forshaw, *Ora et Labora*; Forshaw, 'Alchemy in the Amphitheatre'; Forshaw, 'Subliming Spirits'; Forshaw, 'Vitriolic Reactions'; Forshaw, 'Paradoxes, Absurdities, and Madness'. On Croll, see Hannaway, *The Chemists and the Word*, chs. 1–3; Crollius, *Alchemo-medicinische Briefe*.

¹⁵¹ For examples, see Forshaw, *Ora et Labora*, vol. 2, pp. 52/53, 170/71, 206/7, 214/15, 222/23, 240/41, 280/81, 318/19, 448/49, 452/53, 462/63–64/65 and 472/73. Arndt has become the subject of an impressive number of recent studies, some of which are exceedingly substantial: see e.g. Geyer, *Verborgene Weisheit*; Neumann, *Natura sagax*; Schneider, *Der fremde Arndt*; Illg, *Ein anderer Mensch werden*.

¹⁵² Forshaw, *Ora et Labora*, vol. 2, pp. 222/23. 'Felix cui indicans, et indicatum ritè cognita. JHSVH CHRISTI Persona, Passio et Resurrectio: LAPIDIS PHIL[OSOPHORUM] Materia, Præparatio et in corpore glorificato plusquamperfectio: Tuique ad imaginem et similitudinem DEI formati, secundum Corpus, Spiritum et Animam Regeneratio'. The extrapolation is Forshaw's. I have adapted Forshaw's transcription and translation in a variety of ways, most notably by translating *regeneratio* as 'rebirth'. The string of consonants 'JHSVH' stands for Jesus; it is the pentagrammaton of Christian kabbalah, first formed by Johannes Reuchlin. Comp. Dan, 'The Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin'; Zika, 'Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*'.

Since he died in 1605, this commentary would have been composed several years prior to its appearance in print. If Arndt's letter (dated 25 December 1599) to Khunrath's associate and later editor, Erasmus Wolfart (fl. 1596–1609), is any indication, Khunrath did indeed give rise to discussions of rebirth as analogous to alchemical transmutation much earlier than 1609.¹⁵³ Yet in this letter, the mystical identification of Christ and the believer is missing. Instead of starting with Khunrath, the story told here begins with texts that have previously gone largely unnoticed.

¹⁵³ Arndt, *Das große Geheimniß der Menschwerdung* (1676), esp. pp. 12–13.